

Rural 3.0: A Case Study of University–Community Engagement Through Rural Service–Learning in Croatia

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Abstract

As part of the project Rural 3.0: Service–Learning for the Rural Development—RURASL (<https://rural.ffzg.unizg.hr/>), to ascertain the needs and gaps relevant to implementing service–learning in rural Croatia, we surveyed three target groups: university students, rural community organizations, and potential service–learning beneficiaries. We discovered three main challenges: *insufficient human capacities*, attributable mostly to *difficulty in obtaining funding*, which *hinders development and implementation of new service–learning projects*. Croatian local action groups (LAGs) and rural NGOs were found supportive of rural service–learning. The older population recognizes a great opportunity to get support for basic living needs, and the younger population shows a great interest in engaging university students in improving the tourist and cultural sector. Higher education institutions' implementation of innovative service–learning will improve the quality of education for sustainable development and promote university–community partnerships in rural areas.

Keywords: higher education, local action groups, rural service–learning, RURASL, rural development



This article describes the early-stage project Rural 3.0: Service–Learning for the Rural Development—RURASL (<https://rural.ffzg.unizg.hr/>) and its early implementation in one of the project partner countries (Croatia). The project represents a knowledge alliance between eight higher education institutions from their respective EU countries (Portugal, Austria, the Netherlands, Spain, Lithuania, Croatia, Italy, and Germany) with expertise in service–learning and social entrepreneurship and eight community organizations: six local action groups (LAGs) that deliver the EU LEADER program (a European Union initiative supporting rural development projects) and two NGO foundations. Together with the community partners, higher education institutions in this alliance will develop new rural service–learning and social entrepreneurship courses and guide their students during the implementation and evaluation

of the new academic module. LAGs in this alliance function as multistakeholder organizations encompassing the private, public, and civil sectors; they aim to support diversification of entrepreneurial activities in rural areas, and to improve quality of life and biodiversity protection. These grassroots organizations work with the rural population on developing innovative and environmentally benevolent entrepreneurial activities. Finally, NGO foundations in this alliance will share their experience and expertise in preparing action plans for rural development that includes many stakeholders: public administrations, village councils, politicians, residents, and civil societies.

One of the main goals of the RURASL project is to help develop the core skills and entrepreneurial capabilities of the rural community (for which such development is not easily accessible). The other important goal is to improve the quality of education for sustainable development and promote

university–community partnerships in rural areas through service–learning. Moreover, the project aims to establish a Virtual Hub with a broad network of academic and rural stakeholders that will offer teaching and learning content (dedicated transnational academic modules with courses on service–learning and social entrepreneurship, community training materials, and digital collaborative and learning tools) and promote interactions between universities and rural community stakeholders.

The main benefits of the project include the creation of an international university–rural community alliance that promotes education and entrepreneurship of people in rural areas, bringing higher education institutions and rural community enterprises together to work on the common issue—development of the necessary knowledge and skills needed to make a change in the rural communities. Other benefits include strengthening the skills and the innovative capacity of adult rural social entrepreneurs, providing practical service–learning and social entrepreneurship experiences to university students in specific rural settings, and developing core skills and rural social entrepreneurship among the high potential rural community in an ecologically sustainable and socially sound way.

In this article we present the initial results of the project in one of the partner countries (Croatia), where a common body of knowledge of all stakeholders (university students, rural community organizations and their beneficiaries, and university instructors) is created based on a detailed needs analysis.

Context of the Project

Rural communities constitute over 91% of the territory of the European Union and are home to more than 60% of the population. More than 112 million people inhabit rural territory (Directorate for Communication, 2017). By 2030 the EU total population is projected to increase by 2%, and the rural population is expected to rise by 0.6% with significant (>10%) increases in rural population around most capitals (Bucharest, Budapest, Dublin, Madrid, Prague, Rome, Stockholm, Tallinn, Vienna, Warsaw, etc.), driven by the lower cost of living near major labor markets (Perpina Castillo et al., 2018).

Rural areas in the EU face multiple chal-

lenges. They offer limited opportunities for networking and collaboration, resulting in labor forces with low skill levels, low skill diversity, and a structural mismatch with the local labor market caused by outward migration of professionals, the young, and the well-educated (“Daring to succeed,” 2011). Moreover, rural areas in the EU are facing limited access to health, educational, and governmental services (Zavratnik et al., 2019).

Rural areas in Croatia follow this trend. According to the Eurostat urban/rural typology, the majority of the population in Croatia (79.1%) live in predominantly rural and intermediate rural regions (Eurostat, 2018). The lack of stable income (only 5.1% of the total number of employees work in the countryside), high average age, low level of education, neglect of architectural heritage, inadequate provision of basic services and infrastructure, and disorderly property management result in neglect of rural settlements and the loss of the younger and able-bodied population (Ministry of Agriculture, 2019). These combined factors pose a serious threat to the further development and even survival of the rural areas.

It is necessary to address these challenges through interdisciplinary perspectives, engaging all relevant stakeholders in a variety of contexts. Zavratnik et al. (2019) advocated the creation of promising conditions for entrepreneurship, equal opportunities for people living in rural areas, and making rural communities attractive to live in. LAG initiatives in Croatia carried out as part of the LEADER program advance the development of rural areas with supporting projects initiated at the local level to revitalize the rural environment and create jobs. Unfortunately, university students are not yet actively encouraged to use their knowledge and skills to contribute to the improvement of rural communities.

In their paper about challenges of rural America, Brown and Swanson (2003) pointed out the falsity of widespread beliefs that “rural” equals “agricultural” or that rural social relationships differ significantly from those in urban society. Today, rural communities are decreasingly reliant on agricultural industries and more interconnected through access to technology and social media (Goodman, 2014). The same applies to rural areas in the EU, although the EU member states differ in their socioeconomic, demographic, landscape, and

climate characteristics.

Theoretical Framing

The RURASL Knowledge Alliance aims to set a framework for an integrated transnational approach of academic teaching and learning that contributes to the development of rural residents, meeting their needs through an innovative methodology. The alliance builds on knowledge of rural service–learning models and infrastructures to support their implementation through the active collaboration between higher education institutions and community organizations, among which the most numerous are LAGs or rural NGOs.

Service–learning is a pedagogical approach that offers students academic credit for learning derived from active engagement within the local community and work on real–world problems (Mikelić Preradović, 2015). In mission statements and university strategic plans, it is recognized as a tool that increases the effectiveness of education for sustainable development and the promotion of university–community partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

Service–learning strengthens learning; facilitates the development of professional competencies; and improves motivation, critical thinking, social responsibility, and active citizenship (Billig et al., 2005). Students who pursue service–learning “gain higher levels of problem–solving skills, critical and creative thinking, communication skills, teamwork, interpersonal and intercultural skills, leadership as well as academic skills and personal and civic values” (Astin et al., 2000; Carrington & Selva, 2010; Harris et al., 2010; Milne et al., 2008; Prentice & Robinson, 2010; Rochford, 2014, cited in Josić & Mikelić Preradović, 2019, p. 167). Furthermore, skills and innovation gained from partnerships between rural partners and universities foster innovative development in rural areas in need of human resources and entrepreneurial skills and could provide support for rural beneficiaries (Sanchez Ramirez, 2011). Research (Stoecker & Schmidt, 2017) suggests that rural communities lack access to service–learning and that rural issues are rarely addressed in contemporary service–learning (Campus Compact, 2008). Universities can play a powerful role in rural communities (Watson et al., 1997), addressing rural needs and providing students with engag–

ing learning experiences and opportunities through rural service–learning. Moreover, rural service–learning implementation shows the potential to respond to the needs of rural areas and work with them to develop sustainable economic, social, and environmental solutions to their changing landscape (Buchanan et al., 2017; Maakrun, 2016; Stoecker & Schmidt, 2017).

In Croatia, service–learning is gaining popularity only within urban higher education institutions and is completely absent in rural areas. The explanation for this difference lies partly in an enduring communist heritage and historical legacy, along with special features and trajectories related to citizenship, civil societies, and civic participation (Mikelić Preradović & Mažeikienė, 2019).

In their paper on the importance of social innovation for rural areas, Tirziu and Vrabie (2017) exposed five fields of social innovation that can contribute the most: new services in rural areas, new education courses, ecological farming, formation of local action groups, and electronic and social innovations. The RURASL project focuses on two of these areas: new education courses and collaboration of universities with LAGs.

Materials and Methods

To identify the needs and gaps of the main target groups in Croatia, three different surveys were conducted. These surveys aimed to identify

- a. the needs of community organizations (LAGs and rural NGOs);
- b. the needs of the beneficiaries of LAG 5 (e.g., local farmers, unemployed youth, retirees, rural homemakers, rural entrepreneurs, and social businesses); and
- c. the needs and competencies of university students.

The list of questions was created to be used as an online survey or as an interview guide. The online survey is part of the Virtual Hub where community groups and higher education institutions can find a collaborator for service–learning and/or social entrepreneurship (<http://hub.rural.ffzg.hr/Survey/LAG>).

Informed consent was established for all respondents, answering questions was voluntary, and participants could opt out of the

questionnaires and interviews at any point. IRB approval for the needs of community organizations (LAGs and rural NGOs) was not necessary, due to the nature of the interaction with participants (expert interviews, soliciting professional experiential information rather than personal information). IRB approval for the needs of university students was secured through the Ethics committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, as described in the paper that analyzes those needs (Josić & Mikelić Preradović, 2019). IRB approval for the needs of the beneficiaries of LAG 5 was not necessary, as this was not a research project but a service-learning educational program conducted following institutional procedures for quality improvement projects.

Needs of Community Organizations

The questionnaire about the needs of community organizations (LAGs and rural NGOs) was completed online, resulting in 20 responses. LAGs and rural NGOs were asked for general information about their organizations, such as the type of organization and target group. They were asked to describe their biggest challenges for the coming years and how students could help to address them. As described below, they had to choose their organization's rural development focus area, domain, rural development priorities that they would like to support through university-community collaboration, as well as study fields of university students that would be helpful to cope with their challenges.

Rural Development Focus Areas Defined by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)

- Innovation and cooperation
- Links with research and innovation
- Lifelong learning and vocational training
- Farm's performance, restructuring, and modernization
- Entry of skilled/younger farmers
- Agri-food chain integration and quality
- Biodiversity restoration, preservation, & enhancement
- Water management
- Soil erosion and soil management
- Water use efficiency
- Energy use efficiency

- Renewable sources and waste management
- Carbon conservation and sequestration
- Diversification & job creation
- Local development
- Information and communication technologies

Domains of Rural Development

- Elderly
- Market development
- Migrants
- Mountain area
- Natural resource
- Nature conservation
- Networking
- Organic farming
- Producer groups
- Product quality
- Protected areas
- Public goods
- Renewable energy
- Renewables
- Risk management
- Rural business
- Rural proofing
- Rural services
- Rural SMEs
- Short supply chains & local markets
- Smart Villages
- Social inclusion
- Social services
- Soil management
- Stakeholder involvement
- Sustainability
- Tourism
- Vocational training and skills acquisition
- Water management
- Women
- Young Farmers
- Youth

Rural Development Priorities Defined by the ENRD

- Knowledge transfer and information actions
- Consultancy (advisory services, farm management and farm relief services)

- Quality schemes for agricultural products and foodstuffs
- Investments in physical assets
- Restoring agricultural production potential damaged by natural disasters and catastrophic events and introduction of appropriate prevention actions
- Farm and business development
- Basic services and village renewal in rural areas
- Investments in forest area development and improvement of the viability of forests
- Setting up of producer groups and organizations
- Agri–environment–climate
- Organic farming
- Natura 2000 and Water Framework Directive payments
- Payments to areas facing natural or other specific constraints
- Animal welfare
- Forest–environmental and climatic services and forest conservation
- Cooperation
- Risk management
- Financing of complementary national direct payments
- Support for LEADER local development (CLLD—community–led local development)
- Technical assistance
- Environmental protection technology
- Environmental sciences
- Fashion, interior, and industrial design
- Finance, banking, and insurance
- Fisheries
- Food processing
- Forestry
- Handicrafts
- History and archaeology
- Horticulture
- Hotels, restaurants, and catering
- Journalism and reporting
- Language acquisition
- Law
- Management and administration
- Marketing and advertising
- Mathematics
- Natural environments and wildlife
- Political sciences and civics
- Secretarial and office work
- Sociology and cultural studies
- Software and applications development and analysis
- Sports
- Teacher training with subject specialization
- Travel, tourism, and leisure
- Veterinary
- Work skills

Study Fields Represented in More Than 10% of the LAGs/Rural NGOs Surveyed

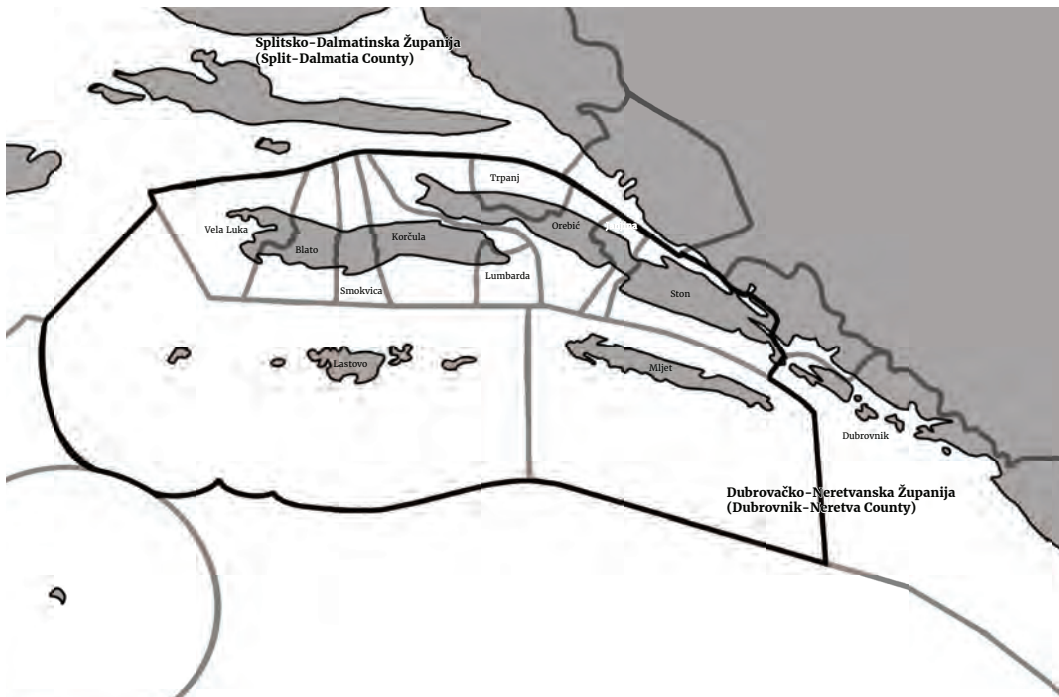
The list of study fields that would be helpful to cope with LAGs' challenges are listed in alphabetical order and not in order of importance.

- Accounting and taxation
- Architecture and town planning
- Audiovisual techniques and media production
- Biochemistry
- Biology
- Business administration
- Computer use
- Database and network design and administration
- Economics
- Education science
- Electronics and automation

Needs of Rural Beneficiaries

The survey of needs among rural beneficiaries was conducted as face-to-face interviews in the activity area of LAG 5. The LAG 5 area belongs to the southernmost region of Croatia, Dubrovnik–Neretva County, and includes the Pelješac peninsula and three islands: Korčula, Mljet, and Lastovo. Most of the area is coastal, and all parts have the same or very similar geomorphological and climatic characteristics as well as economic, social, cultural, and historical features. The LAG 5 area has a land surface of 790.71 km with 25,203 inhabitants (Figure 1).

Apart from the general information about themselves, their neighborhood, and engagement in the local community, the rural residents were asked to define ways in which LAG 5 can help improve their living and ways in which university students can help them satisfy their needs.



■ Boundaries of LAG 5 with the local authority units

Figure 1. Area of LAG 5

Data collection resulted in both quantitative and qualitative data. Through face-to-face interviews with rural beneficiaries of LAG 5, responses from 32 participants were collected. Most of them were local farmers (15), homemakers (5), and tourist workers (4). The results of these interviews were merged to summarize and systematize the stakeholder needs.

Needs and Competencies of University Students

A survey of students' needs and competencies was conducted in four Croatian public universities: University of Zagreb (the largest public university in Croatia), University of Zadar, University of Osijek, and University of Rijeka. A questionnaire for higher education institution students was based on the Entreprcomp conceptual model (Bacigalupo et al., 2016) and aimed to research the attitudes of students toward acquiring entrepreneurial skills during their study, the level and frequency of students' community engagement, and the relevant set of skills required to implement the change in the local community (Josić & Mikelić Preradović, 2019).

Results and Discussion

The implementation of the LEADER approach in the Republic of Croatia through LAGs is an important instrument that can contribute to rural areas' development. LAGs and rural NGOs covered by this research come from different parts of the Republic of Croatia and have different experiences in cooperation with higher education institutions. This cooperation is based mostly on the implementation of joint projects from different fields of applied science where LAGs provide local support for higher education institutions. Many LAGs carry out education or work assignments at local primary or secondary schools.

LAGs in Croatia face three main challenges: (1) insufficient human capacities, which are mostly attributable to (2) difficulty in obtaining funding, leading to (3) the sub-optimal development and implementation of new service-learning projects. Croatian LAGs have shown interest in service-learning where students could participate in day-to-day activities, from general affairs to the preparation and implementation of various development projects. Inclusion of students into the work of the association

is more than welcomed, and each LAG can offer good working conditions and several hours of mentoring.

Although originating from different rural areas in different parts of the country, the needs of Croatian LAGs' rural beneficiaries are, in their essence, very similar. The system for knowledge transfer that would acquaint beneficiaries with the best and latest solutions to foster the uptake of innovation is still insufficiently developed. Digital and financial illiteracy are reflected in the mismanagement of short-term and long-term assets, poor financial management, and investment risk increase. However, universities are rarely recognized as a force for rural social innovation with highly skilled manpower that can help speed up rural development.

In the area of LAG 5, most of the population lives near the Adriatic coast and is oriented toward fishing and mariculture, as well as olive and vine growing. The area has a long tradition of dealing with tourism, which has been a growing sector during the last decade, although the development of infrastructure and local production has not kept pace with tourism-related demands. In this isolated area, the difficulty of transporting goods and managing water, energy, and wastes has led to a higher cost of living, resulting in migration or abandonment of rural areas, especially by the younger population (LRS LAG 5, 2020).

The local population covered by this research had no experience with service-learning. Respondents were mostly farmers, retirees, and homemakers over 50 years old. Their interest in service-learning is largely tied to meeting basic living needs and closely related everyday activities such as primary and specialist health care or education and help with agricultural work. Younger respondents (less than 50 years old) come from the cultural and tourism sectors that reflect their needs. The results obtained through interviews with the local population (mainly from the Pelješac peninsula and the island of Mljet) are presented in Table 1. Respondents have highlighted many services that could be improved in their community, but the most significant are singled out in Table 1.

The most important needs highlighted by most rural beneficiaries are medical care (15 responses) and crop and livestock production (18 responses). Such needs reflect the

age group of respondents—mostly people older than 50 years. In addition, the rural community lacks common activities and public events, so they pointed out music and performing arts (15 responses) as two of the important needs. The analysis of the needs and gaps of rural organizations (LAGs and rural NGOs) and their beneficiaries (rural residents) revealed both a wide range of rural challenges and recognition that available fields of study will enable students to contribute to the solution of several challenges through service-learning projects or programs. LAGs, NGOs, and their rural partners could implement service-learning programs and use the students' services to ensure more economically sustainable development of local partnerships and improve the living conditions of rural beneficiaries through service-learning.

The results of the survey conducted in four Croatian public universities (Josić & Mikelić Preradović, 2019) revealed that students lack opportunities for service-learning and community engagement during their study, especially at the undergraduate level. All surveyed students were very motivated for rural service-learning and eager for increasing competencies for entrepreneurship. The results also show that there is a need for an undergraduate course that will link service-learning and (social) entrepreneurship and enable students to acquire skills that they perceive as relevant for their future careers, as well as community engagement.

From the perspective of the LAGs, engaging students already living in the rural area would bring them closer to an entrepreneurial perspective in the local community, which could encourage younger people to remain in rural areas in the future. Also, as Davis et al. (2020) pointed out, service-learning might be used to ameliorate rural personnel shortages. Doing so, however, would require engaging community organizations (e.g., LAGs) to nurture connections between all stakeholders (students, rural community organizations, university instructors) through the entire duration of the project and to provide a sustainable plan when the project ends.

Next Steps

The RURASL project will set up a common framework and online space at the European level to stimulate rural social entrepreneurship, the development of rural residents'

Table 1. Rural Population Needs for Service-Learning and Social Entrepreneurship Implementation (N = 32)

Occupation of respondents (Contribution %)	Stakeholder needs
Public bodies (3.1%)	Public services do not have enough capacity to improve the work and functioning of their organizations themselves and require domestic services, sustainability of electricity and energy, and work skills. They expect support from local associations and the LAG in reviving entertainment in the community such as music and performing arts, sports, and leisure.
Farmers (46.9%)	Farmers pointed out a problem of fulfilling obligations related to business administration, as well as a lack of knowledge regarding marketing and advertising. They have shown great interest in assistance with crop and livestock production. They expect help from the LAG with applications for EU funds for rural development to improve their businesses.
Homemakers (15.6%)	Homemakers spend a lot of time taking care of their family and food production. Areas of interest for the implementation of service-learning are mostly related to their daily activities such as domestic services, crop and livestock production or horticulture, but also medical care that includes nursing and midwifery, medical diagnostic, therapy, and rehabilitation. They expect the local LAG and NGOs to organize informal education for rural children in music and performing arts or handicrafts and foreign language acquisition.
Cultural workers (9.4%)	The cultural sector wants to involve students in the activities in the field of audiovisual, technical, and media production or music and performing arts. They need support from the LAG with business administration, marketing, and advertising, as well as teacher training in art specialization.
Retirees (9.4%)	Retirees mostly need company and fulfillment of free time. They would like to acquire basic computer skills and get domestic services but also need increased availability of medical diagnostics, nursing, therapy, and rehabilitation. They need support from the LAG to learn foreign languages and organize activities in their leisure time.
Tourist workers (12.5%)	Tourism employees need to improve their knowledge and work skills in the hotel, restaurant, and catering business; business administration; and marketing and advertising, as well as horticultural skills. They need support from the LAG for better positioning and promotion of locally grown food and beverages in tourism.
Teachers (3.1%)	Teachers in rural areas seek better working conditions and more training in subject specialization, as well as to improve their skills in psychology, sociology, and cultural science. They expect support from the LAG for applying to educational programs and funds, primarily the EU education and training program ERASMUS+.

core skills, and university students' responsiveness to the needs of rural areas so they will work with rural communities to develop sustainable economic, social, and environmental solutions.

Based upon the results of our needs assessment for all three groups (students, rural LAGs and NGOs, and rural residents), the following steps are planned:

1. Develop academic courses with a service-learning component targeting specific student skills and rural needs.
2. Establish community training based on the analysis of rural needs in Table 1.

As enterprises that foster rural development, the LAGs and their partners provide twofold contributions: They will develop their skills in funding rural development needs in a financially self-sustainable way, reducing their reliance on subsidies; at the same time, they will disseminate skills and practices of social entrepreneurship to tackle the gap between available social services and access to publicly funded social services.

Also, the RURASL project will address the following national strategic objectives in higher education:

- a. improve key competencies of students, particularly in the less developed areas with lower levels of education;
- b. improve the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of higher education; and
- c. improve the collaboration of higher education institutions and community organizations, educating socially responsible citizens and thereby contributing to the overall development of the community.

RURASL results will be disseminated to a broad network of stakeholders, including academic and rural communities. This network will achieve sustainability through promotion of community–university rural

networks among the national rural networks that are part of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) hub in many EU countries.

In the short term, LAGs and rural residents should benefit from the student services, knowledge on how to effectively utilize students, and education on the possibilities of social entrepreneurship to provide income for funding a broad array of public services in rural areas that lack finances. LAGs will bring together rural beneficiaries to choose the issues to address and direct the abilities of universities to access knowledge about those issues.

In the long run, LAGs and rural residents should benefit from the community–university partnerships. These partnerships will leverage local assets to increase the social capital in the community, create more independent models for funding, and implement innovative projects that will bring a new layer of grassroots empowerment to the existing LEADER approach.

Conclusion

Not a single Croatian university currently offers a curriculum that includes rural service–learning because such a curriculum would require collaboration between different (and sometimes remote) stakeholders and would involve a teaching and learning context much more demanding than the urban context. Higher education should respond to these challenges.

In all Croatian rural areas, the potential exists to support innovation in education and strengthening of social capital. Partnerships with universities could provide skills and innovation that would enable LAGs to foster innovative development in rural areas to bolster scant human resources and entrepreneurial skills and provide support for rural beneficiaries before and after the students' civic engagement period.



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